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ABSTRACT

The self- and group-initiated and on-the-job learning activities of low-income women were explored in a study of a small group of low-income mothers living in the greater Vancouver area of British Columbia, Canada. During the study, the low-income women attended meetings during which a participating researcher documented the women's experiences. The researcher collected additional data through e-mail conversations with the women. The women's first income-generating project involved making gift baskets of homemade foods and ready-to-use mixes. In their second major venture, the women made connections with selected nonprofit organizations in the United States and Central America and purchased handcrafted items from the cooperatives for resale. Their third venture was to create a World Wide Web-based catalogue where other nonprofit groups could purchase space to sell their handmade crafts. During these ventures, the women also explored a wide range of sources for obtaining grants to support their endeavors and made connections with other women's groups via the Internet. The women's activities provided evidence of the diverse learning paths emerging form various income-generating group projects and illustrated their efforts to work cooperatively in a spirit of entrepreneurship. The study also illustrated the possibilities of using academic resources and activist-oriented research to work in solidarity with low-income women. (MN)

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Exploring the Self/Group Initiated and On-the-Job Learning Activities of Low Income Women

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Abstract: This paper explores the breadth of learning undertaken by small group of low-income women who came together to explore various income-generating ideas. Bringing into view these learning experiences disrupts some of the individualistic, sexist and classist assumptions about self-directed and on-the-job learning dominating adult education and lifelong learning policy and programs.

Introduction and Purpose

Between 1998 and 2001, a small group of low-income women (all mothers, some were on welfare, others in low-waged jobs), living in the greater Vancouver area in B.C. Canada, worked together to explore various income-generating projects. Their learning activities were documented as part of an action-oriented research project. One of the goals of this paper is outline the breadth of this learning and to illustrate the relational (rather than individual) character and the situated (rather than context-free) quality of their learning. A further goal is argue that this learning was not about 'self development', at least how it is understood in mainstream adult education policy and discourse; it was purposeful, at times counter-hegemonic, learning that supported these women's desires to break free of poverty. These women (and the researcher) were engaged in a form of on-the-job learning, and this account directs attention to the assumptions about what counts as work imbedded within the discourse of 'workplace' or on-the-job learning. The overall purpose of this paper is to outline the breadth and quality of their learning adventures in order to disrupt some of the individualistic, masculinist and middle class biases found in the adult education discourse and current welfare and lifelong learning policy.

Participating in the Welfare Wars

This project is informed by a commitment to academic activism, to use the privilege and resources of the academy to engage in 'the welfare wars', to disrupt the neo-convervative poor-bashing dominating welfare reform discourse. This discourse is rampant as evident by a recent news article in the Canadian national newspaper the Globe and Mail (2002). Greenspon, a well known neo-conservative journalist, exploits the winning of gold medals at the recent Olympics by the Canadian women's and men's hockey teams to push an ideology of excellence and dismiss the need for policies that are geared toward equity.

> We finally appear to be moving—slowly—but inexorable—from policies based on equity to policies based on excellence....Equity policies predicated on equalizing everyone—even if equalizing them down—are giving way. No longer are we content as a society with *coddling our losers* [my emphasis]. Rather, we seek to provide greater opportunity for individuals to turn themselves into winners. (p. A8)

Such sentiments are common place, unfortunately, in the discourse of welfare reform occurring both in Canada and the U.S. . Nancy Fraser (1989) maps out three struggles for feminist activists and researchers who seek to excavate the ideological bedrock of social welfare

policy: one is to politicize issues and argue for their inclusion in public policy debates, another struggle is to maintain a presence as these issues are debated and different solutions developed, and the third is to democratize the decision-making process so that those individuals whose lives are being determined by policy are part of the discussion from the beginning. Anna Yeatman (1998) points to the challenges of participating in policy discussions at a time when the principle of the market has replaced the principle of government. Yeatman suggests that this approach to policy is quite different from an orientation that sees government as part of a process grounded in notions of public values and public goods which she identifies as the shared interest of a citizen community. She calls for policy activism that is based on the values of an "interventionist and democratic state" which is:

> ... consistent with a value orientation and pragmatic commitment to a conception of policy which opens it up to the appropriate participation of all those who are involved in the policy process, all the way from points of policy conception to delivery on the ground." (p. 10)

Unfortunately single mothers on social assistance and those working in low-waged jobs are rarely regarded as 'stakeholders', rather, they are constructed as recipients, clients, and as the fiscal crisis of the state grows, they are being increasingly regarded as non-citizens and less deserving of support in relation to others, specifically those who have paid employment. As anti-poverty activist and writer Jean Swanson (2001) has noted in her exploration of the practices, impacts and origins of poor bashing, much can be attributed to religious reforms taking place in Europe in the 1500s, in particular the ideas put forward by Martin Luther who positioned work, including that of milkmaids as well as teachers, as the only way to live acceptably in God's eyes.

> Luther's plan to help the poor was an expression of the newly developing Protestant ethic that is still embedded in the way many Canadians think nearly five hundred years later, even thought they may not be Protestant or reigious at all. (p. 32)

Similar concerns have been expressed by feminist scholars who see the work ethic persisting as a key ideological current in social welfare reforms and responses to economic changes. Patricia Evans (1997) draws attention to how difficult it is to disrupt the dominant discourse regarding social programs, one that is a response to globalization, economic restructuring and the deficit, a response that constructs many social weflare programs as 'passive' and too expensive. "Paid work, the critical nexus for the modern construction of social citizenship, is becoming more difficult to obtain in the global economy, while at the same time, it is increasingly viewed as a 'badge' of citizenship" (p. 106). Evans goes on to note how this view of citizenship is particularly problematic for mothers and those whose main work is to care for others. In the current climate, as Ostner (1994, quoted by Evans) notes, "those who care for dependents during their life course or who are among those groups ascribed such roles can easily become 'laggards' in a competitive economy" (p. 127).

Activist Research

This account of the diverse learning projects of a group of low-income women grew out of a feminist-oriented community-based action research project. Community-based research seeks to develop and maintain social and personal interactions that are non-exploitative--that

enhance the social and emotional lives of all people whom participate. In this project, the everyday world, particularly the learning experiences of a small group of low-income women was the starting point. I met the founder of this collective, a white, single mother with two preschool children who was on social assistance, a woman whose family background was poor and working class, at a meeting organized by an anti-poverty organization. We kept in touch and she invited me to a meeting in her home in a social housing project in the suburbs of Vancouver. There were several other women at that meeting, some of them on welfare, others working in community-based anti-poverty groups, and a few who were workers in the welfare system. Several meetings were held where various ideas were discussed. Some participants expressed an interest in organizing other low-income women to critique and resist welfare rules and regulations. Others wanted to turn their attention to finding ways to work collectively, rather than participate in welfare to work programs as individuals, who would then compete with each other for low-waged service sector jobs. The initiator of this meeting was keen to work on the latter issue and a small group, all white women from poor and working class backgrounds (many of them survivors of childhood and marital violence), formed around that notion. Various income-generating projects, described below, were explored.

Initially, my role in these meetings was to listen, make suggestions and give advice when asked. I would comment on their experiences of welfare policy and regulations, relating my observations to ideas in feminist literature, which discussed welfare reform. At their request, I copied and shared with the group some of this literature. At one point, I remarked to the group members that they were engaging in self-directed, on-the-job learning experiences, forms of learning valued and recognized in the field of adult education. I noted that the literature described these kinds of learning as important, but usually in the context of activities undertaken by paid workers or members of community organizations. Rarely did the literature I had encountered discuss self-directed and on-the-job learning in relation to the lived experiences of low-income women and single mothers on welfare. They expressed an interest in these concepts and so I copied some articles from the adult education literature on these ideas and brought them to the meetings. And so the group's activities expanded, to include at times, critical self-reflexive discussions about what they were doing, about their lived experiences of welfare, and how these lived realities compared with the dominant discourse.

After several months of meeting with them, I explored with them the idea of building in a research component to their work. We discussed several possibilities and read some of the related literature on action research. These discussions included strong criticisms about how academic research is often exploitative and benefits only the researcher, making little difference to the lives of research subjects, particularly poor women. I suggested that it was important for their initiatives to be documented as a form of self-directed, on-the-job learning and that these stories and accounts should be part of the academic adult education and feminist literature. I also argued that this information could be used to help change welfare policy. The women thought the former goal was a good idea, but they held little hope that the project would have any impact on policy. My role would be to document their experiences by attending meetings and through email conversations—no formal interviews took place. I used my research funds to cover costs such as child care and food for the larger group meetings, to purchase computers, Internet training, Internet accounts, books, supplies, and to cover some local travel (these resources were identified by the women as important).

Providing research stipends to these women was considered. Welfare regulations made this difficult, as any income that these women would earn would result in an equivalent reduction

in their welfare cheques. The regulations of the university in relation to research grants were also problematic; there were restrictions on paying community researchers and using research funds to cover childcare costs. In an effort to disrupt the 'academic as expert' view of research and to use this project to influence policy, I participated along with two of the group members in an 'alternative welfare policy' workshop run by a non-profit group. I also presented some of the outcomes of this research relationship with one of the collective members at an academic conference. My own every day lived experiences as an academic researcher/educator were at times the subject of discussion. These discussions were my effort to make transparent the way research is constituted as part of my responsibilities, to share with them the process of 'data gathering', analyzing, publishing, and presenting so that the problematic of academic research was also considered.

Adventures in Learning

The first income generating project involved making gift baskets which consisted of home made jams and jellies, ready to use mixes for scones, special teas and coffees and mugs depicting a woman with many hands juggling her various domestic activities. I took these baskets to work, conferences and various meetings and sold them to my academic colleagues and friends. The gift basket idea continued for several months, most of the baking and decorating of baskets taking place in the group leader's small one bedroom apartment. These were noisy, chaotic gatherings with many children playing and needing attention, jam cooking on the stove, jars being sterilized, labels and recipes being printed, baskets being wrapped in colorful paper, ribbons and bows attached. The group tested and tried various recipes, did some comparison shopping at businesses that made similar baskets, became savvy buyers of wholesale goods, expressing great satisfaction when good products were made and materials at competitive prices were found. The group learned about pricing and marketing, turning recipes for small batches of jam into ones for bulk cooking, about working cooperatively and using the computer to make labels, and print information about the group. Group members were not always in agreement--there were tensions and conflicts; some felt they were doing most of the work while others had not held up their end of the bargain.

The baskets were beautiful creations, carefully pulled together with hours of labor. Some group members commented on the contrast between these carefully crafted high quality baskets and their everyday lived experiences of searching for the cheapest food and living frugally and without frills (such as special teas, coffees and home made jams!). As hopes were raised by the basket sales, the group began to wonder if this might be a way to generate income that could be sustained over the long term. More baskets were made and taken to flea markets; tables were purchased at craft fares where these baskets were put on sale. Few sales were made at these venues and so the idea of gift baskets was set aside.

The second major venture took them into the world of import and export, fair trade, and communication with women's cooperatives in Central America. The group leader, now a savvy Internet surfer, had made connections with some non-profit organizations in the United States and Central America. From these links, she identified several cooperatives in Central America where the women were involved in handmade crafts. Samples of these items were purchased, but many did not survive the journey through the regular postal service. Courier services were used for the next shipment, which arrived safely. New materials including ceramic bowls and cups, wooden carvings, hand made shorts, earrings made their way to the group and new gift baskets were created using these products. This time the women priced the baskets significantly higher

in order to cover the costs of purchasing, shipping and their own labor. But the sales were poor and women discovered they could not compete with other non-profit organizations such as Oxfam that had set up stores and catalogue businesses to sell similar items.

The next venture was in creating a web-based catalogue where other non-profit groups could purchase space on the web site to sell their hand made crafts. Research was conducted over a period of months, including explorations of various web design software, acquiring the capacity to accept credit cards over the Internet, exploring security issues related to credit payments on the Internet. At this point the women became very interested in the notion of fair trade, and discovered using the Internet a variety of organizations involved with developing fair trade principles and evaluating companies as to whether they would meet the criteria as a fair trade business. Connections were made with a local Latin American advocacy group and a new territory of importing goods was explored, that of bringing in organic coffee. To avoid the problems with the postal service experienced earlier on, the group partnered with someone who was to drive down to Central America and return with the coffee as well as other crafts made by several women's cooperatives. This adventure turned into yet another learning experience. On the way through the U.S., the truck was stopped, seized by immigration authorities and the driver put jail. Members of the group became involved in organizing, mainly on the Internet; to have the driver and truck released. Eventually the driver was freed, but the truck and its contents never were returned and so the group lost their products.

These were some of the various ideas the group explored as income generating projects. As the women were involved with the activities noted above, they also explored a wide range of sources for obtaining grants to support their endeavors. Credit unions, foundations, international development agencies, provincial and federal ministries that dealt with small business, cooperatives and community development were researched as were the rules and regulations involved with becoming a non-profit society and a cooperative. The group also made connections with other low-income women's groups, again, using the Internet. At one point we took a road trip to another city where we visited a women's collective that had started their own thrift store and drop-in center.

During this time, the membership shifted as one woman left the group and was replaced by another. There were tensions and conflicts as well as they discovered that they had different, and at times competing worldviews, values and expectations of each other and of the future. The collective disbanded in 2001 and a small amount of income that was generated was divided equally among the members.

Implications for Policy, Practice and Research

As was argued in the introduction to this paper, the learning experiences of this group were diverse, they were undertaken within the group, not as individual projects; these various learning paths emerged from the different income-generating projects the group was exploring. The labor of these women was significant, their commitment was substantial; this was *work* and their learning (and mine) was on-the-job learning. Their efforts to find a viable income-generating project and to work cooperatively illustrate their entrepreneurial spirit. Contrast this with the individualistic, functionalist and instrumentalist discourse found in many adult education discussions about self-directed learning. Contrast this with the poor-bashing discourse of welfare reform, which constructs single mothers on welfare as dependent, lacking in skills and initiative and needing direction. This study also tells the story of the relational quality of action and activist-oriented research, of the possibilities of using academic resources to work in

solidarity with low-income women. Finally, this study points to the need for policies and practices that would provide recognition and resources to support the nonformal, self-initiated learning adventures that occur in the domestic, everyday lives of low income women.

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